

# **What Sparks Ethical Decision Making?**

## **The Interplay between Moral Intuition and Moral Reasoning: Lessons from the Scholastic Doctrine**

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### **Abstract**

*Recent theories on cognitive science have stressed the significance of moral intuition as a counter to and complementary part of moral reasoning in decision making. Thus, the aim of this paper is to create an integrated framework that can account for both intuitive and reflective cognitive processes, in order to explore the antecedents of ethical decision making. To do that, we build on Scholasticism, an important medieval school of thought from which descends the main pillars of the modern Catholic social doctrine. Particularly, the focus will be on the scholastic concept of synderesis, which is an innate human faculty that constantly inclines decision makers toward universal moral principles. Managerial implications are discussed, stressing how a rediscovery of decision makers' intuitive moral judgments could be relevant in the reflective thinking practice of managers' ethical reasoning, thus saving them from rational insensitivity to ethical dilemmas.*

**Keywords:** Ethical decision making; Dual processing theory; Intuition; Emotion; Cognition; Synderesis.

### **Introduction**

Following recent corporate scandals in the global economic scenario, research on ethical behavior has increasingly developed within the general area of business. In particular, ethical decision making has progressively gained relevance in the

management literature (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). A comprehensive body of research has been produced, either with a theoretical or an empirical approach (for an extensive review of this subject see, for example, Craft, 2013; Ford and Richardson, 1994; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). A primary and central element of all this body of literature mainly remains a rationalist and cognitive approach, among which Rest's model of ethical decision making (1986) is one of the most cited specific frameworks. Building upon this, a variety of theoretically positive and descriptive models of ethical decision making have been proposed, all pointing to a predominance of rational processes (e.g. Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Treviño, 1986). In such models, intuition and emotions are set apart or completely disregarded, and for this reason the rationalist approach seems to encounter limitations and shortfalls, especially in uncertain, unexpected, and dynamic contexts (Groves et al., 2008; Pellegrini and Ciappei, 2015; Treviño et al., 2006). In such circumstances, decision makers rely heavily on their 'gut feelings', emotions and intuitive mental processes (Gaudine and Thorne, 2001; Zhong, 2011). For this reason, social psychologists and business scholars have recently rediscovered the importance of the emotive, instinctive, and intuitive reactions of decision makers (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Haidt, 2001), a claim that is traditionally supported by intuition-based models of human cognition (e.g. Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich and West, 2000). Thus, it seems reasonable to say that these intuitive and emotional processes, which can be summarized in the expression *moral intuition*, deeply influence the decision maker in such contexts (Provis, 2015). In contrast, conscious and rational processes, which can be summarized in the expression *moral reasoning*, in such situations may instead occur in a later phase to offer a 'rationale' or a 'sense' for behaviors and decisions undertaken (Haidt, 2001).

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to propose an integrated theoretical framework for ethical decision making that is able to take into a better account intuitive processes or moral intuition and how such processes can be blended into the traditional rational approach. Although a few scholars have tried to shed some light on this aspect, which is considered a pre-stage of the cognitive process (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009; Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005), such a theme remains scarcely investigated. For this purpose, we specifically use the concept of *synderesis*, a significant element of the scholastic theory on human morality and conscience (Aquinas, 1265-1274; 1947; Bonaventure, 1259; 1956), a Catholic school of thought which has deeply influenced modern Christian social doctrine tradition (e.g. see Benedict XVI, *On Conscience*, 2007; Melé, 2016). The concept refers to an innate human habit that fosters moral judgment and triggers the virtue of practical reason, as specified by recent managerial literature (Celano, 2013; Das Neves and Melé, 2013; Dierksmeier and Celano, 2012).

Within this concept, we want to contribute to the traditional virtue ethics debate that has frequently addressed the problem of ethical decision making (Arjoon, 2010; Bastons, 2008; Melé, 2010), but mainly with intrinsic assumptions of rationalist rationales (Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1986). Thus, the research enlarges the debate by deepening the role of *synderesis* in the instinctive, direct, and automatic formation of moral intuition and its outcomes, i.e. intuitive moral judgments, showing also why this approach is better than other possible explanations of the phenomenon. We propose an integrated framework of ethical decision making that blends the two traditionally opposed perspectives, i.e. intuitionism and a rational perspective, in order to better investigate the antecedents of the ethical decision making stages and unpack the concept of moral intuition.

This work contributes to the literature in three ways. Firstly, it extends the traditional framework about ethical decision making by blending features of the rationalist and intuitionist approaches, as we stated above. Secondly, the research develops a theoretical model for moral intuition. Thirdly, it enriches the virtue ethics paradigm, thanks to the concept of *synderesis*, which allows for a simultaneous account of both intuitional and rational aspects of the ethical decision making process, as explained later.

This study is composed of six sections including this introduction. In the second section we illustrate and apply the dual processing theory of human cognition to ethical decision making, conceptualizing possible relationships between the rationalist and the intuitionist approaches. In the third section, we unpack the notion of moral intuition and illustrate its role in the ethical decision making process. Next, we introduce the concept of *synderesis*, providing propositions about its influences on the overall ethical decision making process. Finally, we discuss the main findings, managerial implications and contributions of this paper, along with its limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.

### **Ethical Decision Making: Traditional and Modern Approaches**

Ethical decision making refers to “a process by which individuals use their moral base to determine whether a certain issue is right or wrong” (Carlson et al., 2009, p.536; see also Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). According to Jones (1991), the main elements that characterize such a process are moral issues and moral agents; a moral issue arises whenever an individual behavior may cause favorable or damaging consequences for others; a moral agent is an individual who acknowledges the presence of a moral issue and acts according to his/her morality. Business ethics

scholars have increasingly studied the relationship between moral issues and moral agents in the ethical decision making domain (Bastons, 2008; Melé, 2010; Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina, 2013). However, traditionally this problem has been tackled with an approach that the literature refers to as rationalist, while more recently, especially thanks to the emergence of psychological studies about human intuition (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Haidt, 2001; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002), a new paradigm has developed, referred to as intuitionist.

### *The Rationalist Tradition of Ethical Decision Making*

Traditionally, rational cognitive models (see e.g. Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1986) have been thoroughly used in research on ethical decision making (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Particularly, Rest's four-component model represents an often used and mentioned tool to describe ethical decision making (Rest, 1986; Rest and Narváez, 1994). In this perspective, the ethical decision making process begins with a phase of *moral awareness*, which is the recognition of a problem involving a moral issue. The act of acknowledging the existence of a moral issue represents the outset of the ethical decision making process (Jones, 1991; Lewis, 1989). In this initial phase, the decision maker 'frames' possible decisions (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986, p. 257), thus revealing his/her 'sensitivity' toward taking others and their welfare into account (Rest and Narváez, 1994, p. 9). This phase is further divided into another two sub-processes; the first is the 'operating' process of the moral agent's cognition that thinks about possible actions; the second, the 'predicting' process, forms ideas about potential outcomes (Bastons, 2008, p. 394). After a moral issue is acknowledged, the second phase of the process is *moral judgment*, when the decision maker formulates a moral judgment about the ethical dilemma, deciding what has to be considered as morally correct (Jones, 1991). Specifically, in this phase the decision maker

deliberates, so s/he assigns moral labels, such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, to possible actions (Melé, 2010; Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina, 2013). Such a phase results in moral judgments that assume “the greatest importance in ethics” (Crossan et al., 2013, p. 570). Once the ethical situation has been morally judged, the next phase is *moral intent*. In this phase, the decision maker’s cognition ‘structures’ possible actions according to his/her moral principles (Bastons, 2008, p. 394). The moral agent decides how to act by prioritizing some moral values above others and being responsible for moral consequences (Craft, 2013; Melé, 2005). As a result, *moral intent* reveals the decision maker’s willingness to implement an ethical behavior (Treviño et al., 2006). Finally, the fourth phase is *moral behavior*, which refers to implementing the ethical behavior according to the moral agent’s intention (Craft, 2013; Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina, 2013). According to Rest (1986, p. 15), moral behavior involves coping with impediments, difficulties, fatigue and frustration. Hence, one of the main features of the moral behavior phase refers to the decision maker’s persistence in implementing an ethical action (O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005).

Current positive models relying on Rest’s framework interpret the ethical decision making process as completely conscious and controlled by the individual (Crossan et al., 2013). In this way, the decision maker intentionally deliberates on moral dilemmas and makes a rational choice (Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina, 2013). What emerges is the predominant role of intentional, deliberate and rational processes over ethical decision making (Haidt, 2001; Weaver et al., 2014). For this reason, with different approaches, all these paradigms refer to a ‘global’ process of moral reasoning, whose function is “to rationalize and provide clear standards of rational justification for directives by which to live the moral life and evaluate the moral practices of individuals” (Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2005, p. 308).

Some authors assert that the ultimate goal of moral reasoning is to re-evaluate the decision and then to provide moral justification for and legitimatization of the decision maker's behavior (Sonenshein, 2007; Zhong, 2011). Whatever is considered as the main purpose of moral reasoning, an evident call has been made to understand factors that may come before the traditional ethical decision making stages or pre-existing conditions that may influence such stages (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Weaver et al., 2014). Three theories are particularly relevant in such a matter: the person-situation interactional framework (Treviño, 1986), the social and environmental contingency models (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986), and the moral intensity factor (Jones, 1991).

Firstly, Treviño's model (1986) focuses on two classes of factor: individual and situational. The former category refers to individual factors pertinent to the decision maker's "experience and circumstances of birth" (Ford and Richardson, 1994, p. 206) such as age, education, employment, personality and values, and Machiavellianism (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). The second category instead refers to particular "situational pressures" (Ford and Richardson, 1994, p. 212) that may also affect the process. Situational factors include organization and industry characteristics, working group and managerial influences, and codes of conduct (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Sonenshein, 2007). These elements are external to the ethical decision making process since they represent preconditions which the decision makers have to cope with. Ferrell and Gresham's model (1985) enlarges the set of contingencies that may affect the process, especially those related to the decision maker's socio-cultural environment (Jones, 1991). Those contingencies include organizational elements such as norms, beliefs and values of social groups, labeled 'significant others', and professional opportunities depending on corporate policy, rewards and punishments (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985, pp. 90-92). Finally, Jones

(1991) theorizes that the way decision makers respond to a particular moral issue depends on the characteristics of the moral issue itself – a characteristic called “moral intensity” (p. 372). Specifically, the perceived moral intensity of an issue raises the level of attention that the decision maker dedicates to the problem (O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005).

What emerges from such models is that both personal and environmental factors impact on decision makers’ ability to recognize a moral issue, sharpening or hampering the whole ethical decision making process (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991). The whole discussion about the rational approaches of ethical decision making is synthesized in Figure 1.

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### *Criticisms of the Rationalist Tradition: The Role of Moral Intuition in Ethical Decision Making*

This work follows the theoretical debate about components that precede the ethical decision making framework (Craft, 2013; O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). The aim of this paper is to respond to this call by adopting an integrated framework where both the traditional and recent studies of social psychology (e.g. Haidt, 2001; 2007; Haidt and Bjorklund, 2008) serve such a purpose.

Modern psychology literature has started to question the assumption about rationality being the principal component of ethical decision making. Haidt’s social intuitionist model (2001; 2003a; 2007) represents one of the most prominent criticisms of the primacy of rationalist models, thanks to the emphasis on the concept of moral intuition. Such a concept is described as “the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike), without any



conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (Haidt, 2001, p. 818). Interestingly, the adjective ‘affective’ denotes the influence of an emotional process within the moral intuition construct. Despite both intuitions and emotions concurring in the formation of intuitive moral judgments (Haidt, 2003b), the present research is focused on the process of intuiting while the discussion about emotions is only instrumental when considering such a theoretical analysis. Also, even if closely related, intuitions and emotions pertain to different spheres of the sensitive level in the decision-making process, respectively the cognitive and appetitive ones (Kim and Johnson, 2013; Wang and Hackett, 2015). In general, intuition may appear “at the fringe of consciousness” (Haidt and Bjorklund, 2008, p. 188; see also Haidt and Joseph, 2004), thus stressing the non-conscious, unintentional, and non-deliberative nature of moral intuition.

Particularly, Haidt’s model (2001) can be included in the broader stream of research that adopts what is called the ‘dual processing’ theory of human cognition (Cushman et al., 2006; Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich and West, 2000). Indeed, the modern psychological debate on moral judgment recognizes the traditional, ‘conscious-reasoning’ perspective (Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1986) and, in contrast, the intuitionist perspective (Haidt, 2001; 2007). According to the former, “people generate moral judgments by consciously reasoning over the principles they articulate in moral justifications”, while the latter proposes that “moral judgments arise as intuitions generated by automatic cognitive processes, and that the primary role of conscious reasoning is not to generate moral judgments, but to provide a *post hoc* basis for a moral justification” (Cushman et al., 2006, p. 1082). As a result, moral reasoning is seen as a ‘servant’ of moral intuition, offering intentional deliberations and rational justification of something that is already present in the subconscious (Weaver et al., 2014, p. 104). The central claim of intuition theorists is that the moral judgment of

decision makers is intuitive and may be more effective than rational information processing (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Haidt, 2001; Zhong, 2011).

These claims replicate the dichotomy proposed by the theory of *System 1* and *System 2* (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2003; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002; Stanovich and West, 2000), which individuates two distinct information processing systems. Actually, psychological scholars differentiate between the intuitive, reflexive, and automatic cognitive processes, named System 1 – also referred to as the ‘experiential system’ (Epstein, 1994, p. 710) – and the controlled, reflective, and analytic processes named System 2 (Evans, 2008; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002; Stanovich and West, 2000). System 1 includes instinctive behaviors that are innately programmed in human cognition and is defined as rapid, parallel and automatic in nature, while System 2 in contrast is described as slow, controlled, logical and sequential in nature, thus resulting in the human powerful general purpose reasoning system (Evans, 2008; Stanovich and West, 2000). Stanovich (2008) recently labeled System 1 with the acronym TASS – ‘The Autonomous Set of Systems’ – stressing that these processes “respond automatically to triggering stimuli; their execution is not dependent upon input from, nor is it under the control of, the analytic processing system (System 2); and finally TASS can sometimes execute and provide outputs that are in conflict with the results of a simultaneous computation being carried out by System 2” (p. 57). On the other hand, System 2 allows conscious information processing systems resulting in abstract, hypothetical, and algorithmic thinking (Evans, 2008; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002). Actually, these two distinct but simultaneous cognitive processes may be in conflict in particular circumstances; this is the case of instinctual behaviors that ‘contrast’ an assumption of complete rationality, such as “overeating, or smoking” (Evans, 2008, p. 268). The opposite case is also true, where reflection and deliberation

may rationally deviate the innate and intuitive ethical propensity of individuals, thus resulting in the ‘unintended unethicity’ of decision makers (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008, p. 553; see also Palazzo et al., 2013). In line with this, integrated models of decision making theorize interactive and iterative relationships between the intuitive and rational processes, interpreted as parallel and complementary (Epstein, 1994; Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005). Such a perspective has recently been named the “spiraling process” in the ethical decision making literature (Woiceshyn, 2011, p. 312). Hence, the dual processing theory of human cognition theorizes the “two minds in one brain” approach (Evans, 2008, p. 268), differentiating between the intuitive, automatic, effortless, and unintentional processes, called System 1, and the reasoned, deliberative, effortful, and intentional processes, called System 2 (Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich and West, 2000).

Particularly referring to the dual processing theory of social judgment, Evans (2008) recently argued that “Intuitive judgments seem to have the System 1 characteristics, whereas reflective decision making seems much more like a System 2 process” (p. 268). Applying such claims to the ethical decision making process, it seems reasonable to argue that the rationalist approach would consider moral reasoning as one of the processes of System 2, being the cognitive process system that any individual activates to evaluate carefully a situation, come up with a conscious and deliberate decision, and structure a course of action (Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009; Provis, 2015; Woiceshyn, 2011). In contrast, intuitive judgment or moral intuition, being unconditional and spontaneously triggered, seems to be associated with the automatic reply of System 1 (see Figure 2).

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Despite purely intuitionist theories being quite categorical, it has been shown that, especially in uncertain, dynamic, and fast changing circumstances, decision makers' System 1, which in moral terms is associated to the moral intuition process, becomes particularly relevant and effective in forming ethical judgments (Groves et al., 2008; Zhong, 2011). However, this current work does not argue that such claims are absolutely correct; rather it seems important to acknowledge the role of intuition, as well as that of reasoning, in forming moral judgment, and blend these elements into an integrated framework, which stresses the significant function of both intuition and reasoning in ethical decision making (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Sonenshein, 2007; Weaver et al., 2014). The integrated model of ethical decision making we are going to present considers moral intuition as a pre-stage of the 'rational' ethical decision making process, and in doing this we are taking into account both intuitionist and rationalist approaches in relation to the decision maker's ethical behavior.

### **Moral Intuition in Ethical Decision Making**

Recent findings reveal that moral intuition, along with the emotional sphere of human cognition, plays a significant role in forming intuitive moral judgments (Cushman et al., 2006; Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001; 2003a). The attempt is to unpack moral intuition and deepen the notion of intuitive moral judgment as an integrated model (Figure 3) that blends the intuitionist perspective with the traditional rationalist one.

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#### *The 'Intuiting' Process*

Firstly, it is necessary to unpack the internal composition of moral intuition building on recent literature evidences. Dane and Pratt (2007) stressed a significant distinction between the process of intuiting and the outcome of moral intuition (p. 36), adding that the whole process is affectively charged (p. 40). Building on this, it is possible to unpack moral intuition into two processes, namely *intuiting* (Dane and Pratt, 2007) and *emotional processing* (Greene et al., 2001), and the resulting outcome called *affect-laden intuitions* (Haidt, 2007).

Decision makers' *intuiting* is a non-conscious cognitive process (Kihlstrom, 1987), characterized by speed and fast information processing (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2003), able to seize external stimuli and to associate them with cognitive structures in a way that is interpretable by the decision maker's mind schemata (Epstein, 1994). Hodgkinson et al. (2008) define *intuiting* as "an automatic self-process, initiated on the basis of explicitly or implicitly perceived cues that operates without effort, intention, conscious awareness or deliberative analytical judgments" (p. 14). The authors agree with Dane and Pratt's differentiation (2007) between such a non-conscious process and its main outcome, namely intuition. Hence, *intuiting* may be interpreted as the first process of a decision maker's moral intuition, activated by the immediate, fast, effortful, and automatic System 1, through which decision makers seize apparently separated external stimuli that are unconsciously re-elaborated in a holistic way (Epstein, 1994; Kahneman, 2003; Kihlstrom, 1987). It is also clear how the *intuiting* process works without any associations with System 2 processes, since it does not involve the decision maker's conscious awareness (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Hodgkinson et al., 2008).

*Intuiting* acquires relevance in the decision making process mostly in dynamic, unclear, and fast-changing contexts, which typically involve managers to 'cut through' details and information (Hodgkinson et al., 2008, p. 14), take a decision in ambiguous

situations with poorly structured problems (Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005), and rapidly exploit cognitive holistic associations in order to make a judgment (Dane and Pratt, 2007).

### *The Role of Emotion in Moral Intuition*

The framework proposed in this research sees *emotional processing* as the second process of moral intuition that comes after the *intuiting* one and represents an affective mediator inclining decision makers toward moral affect-laden intuitions. Actually, affects and emotions represent a significant element of analysis in moral judgment and ethical decision making research, both in the psychological field (Evans, 2008; Fridja, 1993; Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001; 2003b) and the managerial one (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Gaudine and Thorne, 2001; Kim and Johnson, 2013; Lurie, 2004).

Traditionally, the debate concerning the role of emotions in human cognition has seen two different perspectives: firstly, the separation between emotion and reasoning (Zajonc, 1984), labeling the former as ‘emotional unconscious’ (Greene et al., 2001; Kihlstrom et al., 2000). An opposite view instead sees possible the integration between emotion and reasoning, traditionally attributed to Lazarus (1984). The author interprets emotions as a result of reasoning and, therefore, as integral parts of it. Such a perspective may help in understanding the role of emotions as secondary and often detrimental to the decision making process in general, and in the ethical debate consequentially (for an extensive review see Fridja, 1993; Haidt, 2003b; Kihlstrom et al., 2000). However, the modern psychological debate tends to mitigate such division, proposing models that follow the dual nature of the cognitive system. Particularly, Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) theorize a differentiation between the “hot emotional system”, called the ‘go’ system, and the “cool cognitive system”, defined as the ‘know’ one (p. 4). While the former shares the System 1 features, being reflexive, fast,

and simple, the latter shares the System 2 characteristics, namely reflection, self-control, and slowness (Epstein, 1994; Evans, 2008). Hence, it is possible to recognize the existence of a ‘hot’ emotive system, which is “specialized for quick emotional processing”, and of a ‘cool’ system “specialized for complex spatiotemporal and episodic representation and thought” (Haidt, 2001, p. 823). Only basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, surprise and anxiety are parts of the ‘hot’ system; more complex emotions such as desire, disgust, jealousy and empathy instead affect the higher-order reasoning, or in other words, the rational reasoning (Haidt, 2003b; Metcalfe and Mischel, 1999). Notwithstanding the influence that emotions have on ethical decision making, emotions will be interpreted only as an affective mediator of both the intuitive and rational moral judgment.

The proposed integrated model of ethical decision making fits well with such a perspective, proposing that the intuitive ability of the decision maker to perceive, reconstruct and evaluate moral issues related to the ethical dilemma, largely depends on his/her *emotional processing* capacity that represents the affective component of intuition (Dane and Pratt, 2007). In particular, the emotional processing is a significant mediator function played by affects and emotions channeling decision makers’ *intuiting* toward affectively charged intuitions (Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001). This *emotional processing* encapsulates the experiential state of the decision maker during the actual circumstances, therefore playing a significant role in determining intuitive moral judgments (Greene et al., 2001; Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009; Whitaker and Godwin, 2013). For the purpose of a blended model of ethical decision making, it is important to acknowledge the existence of different types of emotions impacting on the ethical decision making process, as will be presented clearly in the framework later, specifying that emotions affecting the intuitive and instinctual decision making process, or moral intuition, belong to the ‘hot’ system. In contrast, emotions of the

‘cool’ system affect the rational and deliberative process, or moral reasoning. Thus, the emotional channeling in analysis here refers to the basic emotions related to the ‘hot’ system.

### *The Intuitive Moral Judgment*

As outcomes of the whole moral intuition process, we have *affect-laden intuitions*, in a more psychological fashion, or *intuitive moral judgments*, in a more ethical fashion, which represent an *a priori* response that emerges in a fast and automatic way (Haidt, 2007; Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009) and result from an affectively charging process (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Greene et al., 2001). While the two aforementioned processes of moral intuition are completely non-conscious, their outcome represented by *intuitive moral judgments* is accessible to the decision maker’s conscious thinking (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Hodgkinson et al., 2008). Such *intuitive moral judgments* are thus the base for an ‘instinctual’ response to a particular situation, usually unstructured, unclear and dynamic. As illustrated in Figure 3, *intuitive moral judgments* represent the outcome of moral intuition that will be rationalized by moral reasoning. Hence, if the moral issue becomes more structured and definite, the analytical and rational processes of System 2 seem more effective in producing an ethical judgment and a consequent ethical behavior (Hodgkinson et al., 2008).

Thus, moral intuition is unpacked in two processes and summarized in Table 1.

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To summarize, moral intuition is the decision maker’s ability to perceive a moral issue that, simultaneously and unconsciously, stimulates a reaction according to what are perceived as the most appropriate moral principles for the concrete situation



(*intuiting*). This process also depends on emotions caused by the actual events and the experiential state of the individual (*emotional processing*). The resulting outcome is represented by intuitive moral judgments that *a priori* appear in the ethical decision making process (*affect-laden intuitions*). In line with the intuitionist perspective, this research acknowledges that, in particular uncertain and dynamic contingencies, moral intuition and its outcomes may directly form a moral judgment, even without the rational deliberation of moral reasoning (Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007; Zhong, 2011). However, at the same time, it is also true that deliberative and rational decision-making processes need to occur to strengthen or correct an intuition. Indeed, it is important to stress that decision makers are not “prisoners of their initial intuitions, unable to change their minds once they have taken a position” (Haidt, 2003a, p. 197). Accordingly, the research proposes a blended and balanced model, taking into account the role of both moral intuition and moral reasoning on ethical decision making.

Finally, a recognition of the existence of moral intuition dispositional factors is necessary, especially at the individual level, along with the decision maker’s experience, which may trigger moral intuition and the resultant intuitive moral judgments (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Dane and Sonenshein, 2014). The framework points to the inner dispositions that lead to moral intuition, similarly to the focus of a virtue ethics approach. However, a pure virtue ethics approach is not completely applicable, since a ‘deliberate’ practice, such as the case of virtues, seems not to be appropriate to describe moral intuition, which instead occurs effortlessly. For this reason, an aim of the paper is to enrich the virtue ethics perspective thanks to a particular human innate habit traditionally associated with the scholastic moral philosophy, known as *synderesis*. This concept, as we will show in the next sections, perfectly suits the

moral intuition paradigm and an integrated ethical decision making model, such as the one we proposed.

### ***Synderesis* in Scholastic Ethics and Moral Philosophy**

Scholasticism has represented one of the most important Christian medieval philosophies in Europe (for an extensive review see Dierksmeier, 2013; Melé, 2016). Recently, Melé (2016) defined the term scholastic as “a method and a system based on the rigorous conceptual analysis of different positions and a careful drawing of distinctions for a better understanding of questions under consideration” (p. 294). Since scholasticism significantly contributed to the evolution of the Catholic school of thought, the present research drawing on such a discipline is completely in line with the modern Christian approach. Although two great scholastic periods can be traced, we draw our analysis from the First Scholasticism of the late Middle Ages (Dierksmeier, 2013; Melé, 2016), particularly from the main Franciscan and Dominican intellectuals who mostly contributed to the development of the notion of *synderesis*, which is the object of the analysis of the present paper.

The Christian concept of *synderesis* has ancient origins rooted in scholastic theory that defines it as a practical natural habit (Das Neves and Melé, 2013) and a cognitive innate disposition (Greene, 1991; Kärkkäinen, 2012). In this work, a comprehensive perspective of this concept is included; it follows the long-lasting tradition of the scholastic school (Greene, 1991; 1997; Lottin, 1942; Ojakangas, 2013; Potts, 1980), integrating and enlarging the original thoughts of Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, hereafter *S. Th.*, ed. orig. 1265-1274; 1947). This attempt is made in order to enrich the modern debate on ethical decision making by integrating the role of moral intuition and moral reasoning in the human cognitive process. Indeed, the research follows a

broader definition and notion of *synderesis*, seen as a natural, innate and affective trait, building on the scholastic works of St. Bonaventure (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, ed. orig. 1259; 1956) and Jean Gerson (*De Theologia Mystica*, ed. orig. 1420; 1958) that seem to be more in line with the recent psychological research on moral judgment. This approach is preferred, rather than a strict adherence to the ‘cognitivist theory’ of Aquinas (Gorevan, 2000, p. 141), in order to still use and enlarge the Thomistic tradition, which is considered highly valuable and capable to interpret even the most recent evidences of the psychological evolution. Such a theoretical building allows this work to propose an integrated model that is in line with modern psychological theories of moral behavior, particularly the socio-intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001; 2007), which stresses the effective role of moral intuition in the ethical decision making process.

As shown later, in the specific analysis of the concept of *synderesis*, the analysis used a time-spanning lode of scholastic studies in order to define this concept, including facets of Aquinas’ original thought. Despite that, a necessary premise seems to be required. The perspective adopted in this study assumes *synderesis* to be an *instinctus naturae* – a divine natural instinct present in every human being – capable of providing moral inclination, thanks to the natural law implanted by God in men’s souls (for a commentary see Greene, 1997, p. 180; Ojakangas, 2013, p. 53). This perspective, specifically derived from the scholastic theory of the thirteenth century, provides elements in line with Aquinas’ traditional definition and concept of *synderesis* (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q.79, a.12; I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q.94, a.2); however, this research also significantly departs from it. More precisely, Aquinas – the most influential Dominican intellectual of the First Scholasticism (Melé, 2016) – describes *synderesis* as “the law of our intellect insofar as it is the habit that contains the precepts of natural law, that is, the first principles of human actions” (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q.94, a.2). Thus, as in the approach adopted in this research, the natural essence of *synderesis* is extensively

present in Aquinas' thought (*Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, hereafter *De Veritate*, ed. orig. 1256-1259; 1972, q.16, a.1, arg.5). The universal principles of law are attributed to *synderesis*, which is consequently interpreted as the natural ability of humans to judge (Celano, 2013; Lottin, 1942). Specifically, Lottin (1942) recognizes natural law as constituted by the universal principles of morality and *synderesis* as the human innate disposition able to reveal them (p. 569). In the Thomistic perspective, *synderesis* is interpreted in a pure, cognitive way by defining it as a natural habit that represents an integral element of the human reasoning process (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q.79, a.12), which allows the pursuit of moral principles and influences individuals' ability in discerning moral decisions from immoral ones (*De Veritate*, q.16, a.1, a.2; q. 17, a.1, a.2). Aquinas in associating the innate habit of *synderesis* with the principles of natural law was influenced by Philip the Chancellor's *Summa de Bono* (1225-1228; 1985), one of the first theological treatises on morality, where *synderesis* is interpreted as a component of the highest part of the human soul that "directs human judgments toward goodness and away from evil" (Celano, 2013, p. 12; see also Lottin, 1942). Particularly, Philip distinguishes *synderesis*, interpreted as "*voluntas naturalis*", from human "*liberum arbitrium*" (free choice), in that the former is naturally directed toward good while the latter may be attracted both by moral and immoral choices (*Summa de Bono*, I, 162-167).

Whereas Aquinas defines *synderesis* as an intellectual disposition of human beings, different interpretations of the concept are especially attributed to the works of St. Bonaventure (1956) and Gerson (1958). St. Bonaventure, who is the Franciscan intellectual leader of the First Scholasticism (Melé, 2016), associates the term *synderesis* with the notion of *instinctus naturae* (natural instinct), adding that *synderesis* operates at the affective and emotional level in order to incline man toward morality without deliberative efforts (Greene, 1991; Lottin, 1942; Ojakangas, 2013).

Hence, St. Bonaventure (In *Quartum Librum Sententiarum*, ed orig. 1259; 1889) defines *synderesis* as an affective habit of the natural will, reinterpreting Lombard's seminal definition (*Liber Primus Sententiarum*, ed. orig. 1152; 2007) of the term, which refers to man's will being naturally inclined toward morality (Potts, 1980). Building on Bonaventure's definition, Greene (1997) states, "So *synderesis* has now become the term for that involuntary orientation and movement of the natural will in the affective part of man's soul" (p. 187; see also Ojakangas, 2013 and Potts, 1980). Accordingly, Gerson (1958) interprets *synderesis* as an instinct that comes directly from God and inclines humans toward morality, specifically defining *synderesis* as a human "ineradicable instinct (*instinctus indelebilis*)" (Ojakangas, 2013, p. 54). Gerson differentiates between cognitive and affective human powers and collocates *synderesis* at the top of affective powers, defining it as an *instinctus naturalis in boni* (natural instinct for good) (Greene, 1997, p. 190); however, such an interpretation of *synderesis* is largely accepted – even in previous studies. For example, in support of this claim is the position of the scholastic theologian Thomas Gallus (*Commentary on Isaiah*, ca. 1218; for a commentary see Javelet, 1961) who clearly separates human *intellectus* (intellect) from *affectus* (affection) and, in doing so, associates *synderesis* with the notion of *principalis affectio* (main affection) (Javelet, 1961, p. 289). Hence, the interpretation adopted here about the nature of *synderesis* is in accordance with this latter perspective; *synderesis* is considered to be an 'instinct' rather than a deliberative process as with the original Aquinas thought.

Building on scholastic theories that stress the affective, natural and innate features of *synderesis*, the next sections highlight how such a concept of the Christian tradition can be perfectly blended in an ethical decision making model by considering both moral intuition and moral reasoning.

### *Synderesis as Innate Inclination toward Moral Intuition*

*Synderesis* has an important role in Christian tradition, as its origin demonstrates. The first appearance of the term refers to Saint Jerome who in the year 415 cited this word in his Commentary on Ezekiel's vision of four creatures with different faces, namely a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, supporting the divine throne (Lombard, 2007; for a review see Langston, 1993; 2011). The Saint associates *synderesis* with the eagle representing the spark of human reason and revealing "the candle of the Lord" that allows moral discernment (Greene, 1991, p. 196; see also Greene, 1997 and Kärkkäinen, 2012). Actually, among medieval scholastic theologians, this interpretation is recurrent and *synderesis* is the *scintilla rationis* (spark of reason) related to a natural inclination of human beings toward intuitively discerning the correct act (Greene, 1991; 1997; Lottin, 1942; Potts, 1980). This is possible thanks to the principles of the natural law imprinted, for the tradition, in the soul of each individual (Bonaventure, 1956; Lombard, 2007). According to these early scholastic constructs, the concept of *synderesis* highlights its main feature, i.e. innate nature (Greene, 1991; 1997).

This element is perfectly in line with the characteristics previously attributed to System 1 and so to moral intuition. Thus, *synderesis* seems reasonably the 'correct' natural habit used during the process of moral intuition; in other words: *synderesis is the correct habit that regulates intuition due to its innate nature and it is present in every individual.*

### *Synderesis as the Catalyst of Intuitive Moral Judgments*

In the late Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, the relationship between the innate natural habit of *synderesis* and human moral behavior received widespread attention (Greene, 1991; 1997; Kärkkäinen, 2012). For Gerson (1958), *synderesis* is a

guiding ability of human cognition toward moral principles (Green, 1991). Similarly, the Thomistic philosopher Peyligk, in *Philosophie naturalis compendium* (1499), interprets *synderesis* as an affective disposition that follows universal moral principles, thus inclining human behavior toward good (Kärkkäinen, 2012). This role of *synderesis*, which in such a perspective is assimilated to human natural law, inclines human behavior toward moral evaluation and moral decision (Greene, 1997). Also Martin Luther (*Dictata Super Psalterium ed. orig. 1515; 1964*), with a completely different ontology, sees *synderesis* as a human cognitive ability to avoid immoral decisions, thus aiming at the most morally correct behavior.

The common ground of all these interpretations is that *synderesis* inclines decision makers' cognition toward moral judgment without what today would be called a proper process of rational deliberation; it allows "the immediate grasp of concrete reality" without conscious reasoning (Liebert, 2008, p. 74). Hence, this Christian concept seems to be in line with the recent social intuitionist model that indeed attributes to moral intuition an *a priori* cognitive function influencing *post hoc* moral reasoning. Such an aspect of *synderesis* is extremely relevant to the present conceptualization; in particular situations, i.e. dynamic and uncertain conditions, thanks to *synderesis* the intuitive moral judgment made by moral intuition – even without a deliberate process – can result as being rightful. This concept can be further discussed; considering *synderesis* as capable of conferring rightful connotations to moral intuitive judgments would imply that even without a deliberate effort these judgments are 'embryonically' or 'primordially' inclined toward goodness. Thus: *synderesis renders rightful the intuitive moral judgment even without a deliberative cognitive effort.*

*Synderesis as an Antecedent of the Ethical Decision Making Process*

Commonly, *synderesis* is seen as a trustworthy part of the soul, a kind of primal conscience able to predispose to goodness (for a review of this interpretation see Benedict XVI, *On Conscience*, 2007). Similarly, in a more managerial fashion, Das Neves and Melé (2013, pp. 773-776) argue that *synderesis* refers to the innate natural cognitive habit that allows decision makers to seek moral behavior, make moral judgments, and reject evil temptations.

*Synderesis*, as already shown in medieval interpretations, is an innate ability to readily discern the natural law principles. However, the natural law by its nature is the primordial imprinting given by God to the human soul to be prone instinctively (innately) to goodness (Das Neves and Melé, 2013). Thus, the natural law is a universal truth that is utterly trustworthy, and its moral principles indicated by *synderesis* are infallible (*De Veritate*, q.16, a.2; q.17, a.2). However, this broad interpretation requires a more specific discussion about *synderesis* to avoid confusion and overlap with other concepts still related to ethical decision making. The first differentiation is with conscience, “*synderesis* grasps the basic moral principles which are the first premises of practical reasoning, while *conscientia* (conscience) is the conclusion, the act of judging that one ought to perform a particular action” (Korsgaard, 2013, p. 110). In addition, Dierksmeier and Celano (2012) also argue that *synderesis* represents a perpetual human moral principle constantly inclining toward rectitude, a concept also found in the thoughts of Aquinas (*Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum*, ed. orig. 1254-1256; 2000, II, d.24, q.3, a.3). This aspect differentiates *synderesis* from individual conscience that can be obstructed by faulty moral reasoning (Korsgaard, 2013). On the same level, Verplaetse (2009) also stresses the difference between *synderesis*, considered as the infallible divine precept present in every individual, and conscience, interpreted as the application of that infallible set of principles that may result in immoral behavior caused by misleading reasoning.



Whether or not these approaches are completely to be espoused, the common and relevant aspect for this research is that *synderesis* is the habit that precedes the cognitive stage of moral reasoning. Yet, *synderesis* seems to suit a ‘balanced’ framework that integrates both the rationalist and intuitionist approach. As premised in the previous paragraph, *synderesis* confers rightful contents to intuitive moral judgments; such ‘judgments’ are also used in the formal or rational processes of moral reasoning. Hence, it is possible to summarize that: *synderesis is an antecedent of the ethical decision making process, giving the rightful base from which to develop a complete moral decision.*

#### *Synderesis as an Innate and Acquired Habit: The Dual Nature of Synderesis*

The previous sections showed how *i)* *synderesis* as an innate habit is the correct basis that can be applied to moral intuition; *ii)* *synderesis* confers rightful connotations to intuitive moral judgments without a deliberative effort; and *iii)* *synderesis* is considered to be an antecedent of moral reasoning. However, *synderesis* does not only ‘offer bases’ for moral reasoning, it concretely contributes to reasoning’s perfection.

In order to apply such a scholastic notion to an integrated framework that attempts to combine the intuitionist and rationalist perspectives, the research specifically refers to the Dominican theologian John Poinot (*Tractatus de Signis, ed. orig. 1632; 1985*). Poinot, in his discussion about the ‘natural’ and ‘acquired’ aspects of *synderesis habitus* (habits), describes them as “*partim acquisiti, partim naturales*” (partially acquired, partially natural) (Forlivesi, 1993, p. 398). Despite the fact that such a differentiation does not emerge in the original thoughts of Aquinas, the Saint already theorized some kind of seminal elaboration on this topic by separating the ‘affective knowledge’, called *per quandam connaturalitatem* (on account of connaturality), from the knowledge called *per modum cognitionis* (on account of reason) (*S. Th.*, II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>,

q.45, a.2). According to Smith (1998), “Aquinas argues regarding the first principles of prudential practice that they are known to us ‘by nature’, that they are ‘connatural to us’ (*connaturalia homini*), and that they can be known by ‘natural temperament’ (*naturali dispositione*)” (p. 38). Building on this differentiation, Poinsett (1985) interprets *synderesis*, firstly, as a natural human habit naturally inclined toward deep-rooted moral principles of the natural law that intuitively disposes toward correct and moral judgment, what can be called *innate synderesis*. Secondly, *synderesis* is also an acquired faculty that, according to environmental and experiential factors, is assimilated by the individual’s reasoning. This acquired faculty ‘pushes’ the rational reasoning toward correct behaviors (Forlivesi, 1993). This second dimension, which we call *acquired synderesis*, is not fully natural, despite the principles to which it refers being universally true (natural law). In this regard, *acquired synderesis* requires an effortful and continuous engagement toward finding moral principles, and needs to be practiced at any occurrence, similarly to the traditional definition of virtue (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, hereafter *NE*, VI, 5, 1138b24ff; 1998).

*Innate synderesis* in the model presented, which wants to include the intuitionist approach in ethical decision making, plays a major role and it has been thoroughly examined in the previous discussion. However, we cannot deny the fact that *synderesis*, the acquired one this time, may also influence moral reasoning directly, inclining it toward goodness. In a concise way, firstly: *the natural habit of synderesis or innate synderesis is a pre-rational cognitive disposition that helps intuition by taking into account universal moral principles*. Secondly: *the acquired habit of synderesis or acquired synderesis inclines the rational cognitive process toward good, so that the rational deliberation does not draw away from universal moral principles*.

### **The Role of *Synderesis* in the Dual Processing Model of Ethical Decision Making**

After we built the set of considerations about *synderesis* by drawing upon scholastic moral philosophy (Bonaventure, 1956; Gerson, 1958; Poinset, 1985), blending them with recent psychological approaches (Haidt, 2001; 2007; Haidt and Bjorklund, 2008), we propose an integrated model of ethical decision making highlighting the role of *synderesis* (Figure 4). We will illustrate how, firstly, *synderesis* in its ‘innate’ part may represent the initial input in forming a spontaneous and instinctive intuitive moral judgment and, secondly, *synderesis* in its ‘acquired’ part is a significant influencing element for the moral reasoning phase. In the next sections we will give a full account of the links and influences that *synderesis* has on the whole ethical decision making process, both on moral intuition and its elements, i.e. *intuiting*, *emotional processing* and *affect-laden intuitions*, and on moral reasoning.

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Insert Figure 4 Here  
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#### *The Role of Synderesis in Moral Intuition*

The fundamental function of *innate synderesis*, interpreted as an innate human habit, is to facilitate and prompt ethical decision making in order to let the decision maker immediately discern ethical from unethical behaviors. *Synderesis* reflects well the essence of Christian ethics that prescribes the moral standards decision makers have to follow in order to discern between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (Kim et al., 2009, p. 119). As a result, we may argue that *synderesis* supports ethical decision making in a business context, fostering a moral disposition toward good behaviors.

As shown in Figure 4, the *innate synderesis* triggers moral intuition. Specifically, the role of *synderesis* refers to the ability to balance both *intuiting* and *emotional*

*processing*, i.e. the two processes of moral intuition. Specifically, *innate synderesis* shapes the decision maker's rapid and unconscious *intuiting* that represents the first process of moral intuition (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Haidt, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2008). As we said, the *intuiting* process of decision makers is a fast and reflexive process that automatically appears in consciousness (Dane and Pratt, 2007). Since *synderesis* seems to trigger practical reason (Das Neves and Melé, 2013), at an unconscious level it enriches the decision maker's intuitive system. The concrete situation in which a moral issue takes place impacts on the experiential system of the decision maker (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009; Whitaker and Godwin, 2013) and, regarding the *intuiting* process, we may argue that *innate synderesis* facilitates a continuous, increasing reception of external stimuli present in a moral issue. Although an unconditional process, *intuiting* imprints the experiential system of the decision maker who will feel an easiness/uneasiness in performing such an act. Thus, *innate synderesis* due to its intrinsic nature and being the 'spark of conscience' (Celano, 2013; Greene 1991; Langston, 1993) can be a reasonable element to strengthen the experience toward critically 'assessing' the situation and increasing the reception of external stimuli within the situation. Hence, we propose that:

Proposition 1: *Innate synderesis impacts on the decision maker's unconscious cognitive process of intuiting by promptly predisposing the intuitive reception of external stimuli toward morality.*

Once the *intuiting* process is accomplished, the next process refers to the *emotional processing* of the decision maker's moral intuition (Greene et al., 2001). The *innate synderesis* is crucial in emotionally channeling moral intuition. Depending on the emotional state of the decision maker, opposite feelings such as happiness and anger,

or any other emotion belonging to the ‘hot’ system (Metcalf and Mischel, 1999), may alter the reception of signals and limit the spectrum of information available in that particular moment (Haidt, 2001; 2003b). As argued by Whitaker and Godwin (2013), “fearful individuals favor deliberation and safety, whereas anger leads to less analysis and more risk-taking” (p. 63). Thus, decision makers’ feelings notably affect the evaluative process (Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009). Instead, *innate synderesis* firmly leads the decision maker’s *intuiting* toward universal truth and moral principles, thereby regulating possible excessive emotional reactions. Psychological research would support such a claim, referring to the fact that emotions and intuition are linked one to another thanks to the experiential system (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Epstein, 1994). Hence, in such a cognitive area, emotionally significant experiences influence the decision maker’s moral intuition, reflecting prior social events and past learning that morally affected the individual information processing systems.

So, *innate synderesis*, in framing the experience of the *intuiting* toward the goodness thanks to a balanced emotional channeling process, attenuates dystonic learning loops.

We propose that:

Proposition 2: *Innate synderesis attenuates the decision maker’s altered emotive condition, due to the most basic emotions associated with the intuitive cognitive system, by regulating possible variations of his/her experiential state in order to channel the emotional processing toward pure moral principles.*

### *The Role of Synderesis in Intuitive Moral Judgments*

The main results of moral intuition are intuitive moral judgments (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Haidt, 2001), interpreted as rapid responses to the ethical dilemma a decision maker has to tackle. These judgments are *affect-laden intuitions* (Haidt, 2007) as a result of emotions, feelings, past and current experience, and environmental factors

that meaningfully impact on the decision maker's cognitive moral development (Groves et al., 2008; Kohlberg, 1969; Marquardt and Hoeger, 2009). *Innate synderesis* firstly allows the decision maker to channel external stimuli and his/her affective emotions toward an ethical decision; secondly, *innate synderesis* allows decision makers to respond according to appropriate moral principles for a particular situation, thus disentangling moral dilemmas and forming the resulting *affect-laden intuitions*. We acknowledge the fact that this process is mostly unconscious (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Hodgkinson et al., 2008; Kahneman, 2003), so cannot be handled by the decision maker personally but only through an experiential learning circle that, only at a later stage, becomes 'familiar' to the cognitive structure (Dane and Sonenshein, 2014; Epstein, 1994).

We argue that the main result of intuitive moral judgment is the decision maker's 'moral labeling' of the particular situation, exactly as traditional frameworks stress for Rest's moral judgment (Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina, 2013, p. 718). Also, *innate synderesis*, as the antecedent of moral reasoning, regulates the right 'use' of intuitive moral judgments. It fosters the balancing of the whole ethical decision making process, avoiding an excessive reliance only on intuitive moral judgments that "can lead to injudicious ethical decision making without careful consideration of rational information sources" (Groves et al., 2008, p. 307).

Hence, the following proposition can be made:

Proposition 3: *Innate synderesis inclines the decision maker's intuitive moral judgments toward morality by attenuating possible distortions caused by an excessive reliance on intuitional processes.*

*Synderesis* fits perfectly into a dual model where both of the processes, i.e. moral intuition and reasoning, are included. In other words, *synderesis* also fosters decision

makers' moral reasoning inputs. However, we want to stress that in uncertain, dynamic and equivocal contexts that characterize the modern business scenario (Groves et al., 2008; Pellegrini and Ciappei, 2015), the role of automatic and rapid moral evaluations represents a significant element (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Weaver et al., 2014). For this reason, it is important to refer to the connotation of morality that already intuitive moral judgments have, since this may be the only base used in such circumstances.

### *The Role of Synderesis in Moral Reasoning*

Building on the social intuitionist approach, in our integrated model the cognitive functioning of moral reasoning is positioned after moral intuition's main outcome, namely intuitive moral judgment (Haidt, 2001; 2007), as shown in Figure 3. Hence, moral reasoning is interpreted as a *post hoc* process that works with a conscious, deliberative, and intentional effort (Provis, 2015; Weaver et al., 2014; Zhong, 2011). However, it is important to stress that our model does not want to convey the idea that moral reasoning is only an instrument to 'rationalize' intuition, or that it has a subsidiary role. We are instead supporting the fact that, as antecedents to moral reasoning, there exists some kind of natural intuition of the ethical dilemmas, but at the same time we fully acknowledge the substantial role of moral reasoning in better elaborating and processing an intuitive moral judgment, or even rectifying it.

The aim of moral reasoning is to follow predetermined moral principles so as to address the moral issue of the actual situation faced by the decision maker (Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2005). As a result, the main function of moral reasoning is firstly to evaluate the dilemma analytically and rationally, and later provide moral justification for the chosen behavior. At this stage, the decision maker's *acquired synderesis*, interpreted as a human cognitive faculty resulting from past and current experiences

and environmental influences, allows the avoidance of excessively rational deliberations that could lead to insensitive analysis and erroneous calculations at the expense of the ethical decision making process (Groves et al., 2008). Indeed, *acquired synderesis* impacts on the argumentative rational justification of the decision maker's moral reasoning, weakening the insensitive deviations (Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2005). The function of *acquired synderesis* is to incline moral reasoning and ethical behaviors toward goodness, if distortions of some *post hoc* reflections have occurred for any reason, pointing back to the process of the natural principles that *synderesis* is innately predisposed to find. In this way, re-evaluations and examinations of moral reasoning are morally balanced by the decision maker's *acquired synderesis*. As a result, we argue that:

Proposition 4: *Acquired synderesis controls possible distortive rationalization of the ethical decision making thanks to elevating the individual justification from an argumentative level to a genuinely moral one, assuring the acknowledgment of universal moral principles.*

Finally, in such a deliberative phase, it is important to recognize another role of *acquired synderesis* which consists of controlling the emotions influencing the rational sphere of human cognition, i.e. what we previously refer to as belonging to the 'cool' system (Evans, 2008; Haidt, 2001; Metcalfe and Mischel, 1999). Particularly, such a system is affected by emotions that literature has defined as 'moral', which play a significant role in forming moral judgment and ethical behavior (Haidt, 2003b). Haidt (2003b) labels as 'moral' those "emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 853).



The ‘hot-cool’ theory of emotion (Metcalf and Mischel, 1999) is in line with the original conceptualization of Thomas Aquinas on the topic (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 22, a. 1; see also King, 1999). Particularly, Aquinas recognizes the existence of sensitive and intellectual parts of the soul, both of which have cognitive and appetitive principles (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 26, a. 1), and thus also two different types of human will that oversee the appetites. The *voluntas ut natura* (natural will) denotes a spontaneous will of the decision maker toward *bonum* (good), while the *voluntas ut ratio* (rational will) refers to a deliberative decision making process toward *verum* (truth) (*S. Th.*, III<sup>a</sup>, q.18, a.4). Actually, it is possible to say that the natural will corresponds to the process of handling ‘sensitive emotions’, denoting a spontaneous and natural inclination of human will toward morality, well exemplified by the love of God that may produce a natural inclination toward moral knowledge (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q.1, a.6). In contrast, the rational will deal with ‘rational emotions’ influencing the cognitive inclination of human will toward the truth (Gorevan, 2000; King, 1999). The present interpretation therefore sees sensitive emotions as basic emotions associated with the ‘hot’ system that takes place in System 1, while rational emotions as higher-order reasoning emotions are associated with the ‘cool’ system that takes place in System 2 (Evans, 2008; Metcalf and Mischel, 1999). We also know that emotions may have a negative effect on moral reasoning, in line with Aquinas’ interpretation of passions as ‘obstacles’ that ‘pervert’ human reason (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 94, a. 4). The significant role of *acquired synderesis* refers to preventing the possible ‘clouding’ of a decision maker’s ethical judgment being the *scintilla rationis* – ‘spark’ of conscience (Lombard, 2007) – that gives the rightful base for a deliberative cognitive effort directed toward moral discernment (Bonaventure, 1956; Gerson, 1958).

Also in the literature about ethical decision making, increasing attention has been dedicated to the impact of emotions on moral reasoning (Agnihotri et al., 2012;

Gaudine and Thorne, 2001; Lurie, 2004). Gaudine and Thorne (2001), for example, theorize a ‘cognitive-affective’ model recognizing positive impacts on all the four stages, i.e. moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intent, and moral behavior. Other researches similarly reveal how instead some emotions seem to be more impactful on some moral stages than on others (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Lurie, 2004). According to Melé (2005), positive emotions such as compassion, solidarity, and sympathy, but also negative emotions such as greed and self-sufficiency, significantly impact on the decision maker’s awareness of a moral issue. Such emotions working at the rational level are labeled ‘moral sentiments’ (Melé, 2005, p. 104), which differ from the sensitive basic emotions working in the intuitive ‘hot’ system described above.

This allows us to extend the original Thomistic thought toward an integrated ethical decision making framework, which also considers both kinds of emotion and their roles in respect to moral intuition and moral reasoning. To summarize:

*Proposition 5: Acquired synderesis prevents emotions, i.e. those that are more sophisticated and associated with the deliberative cognitive system, from clouding the rational evaluation of moral dilemmas by redirecting the rational process to the ultimate state of truth.*

#### *The Employability of the concept of Synderesis in a Dual Processing Model*

This distinctive nature of *synderesis* makes it a unique approach for analyzing the ethical decision making process through a dual perspective, i.e. integrating intuitionist and rationalist perspectives. We offer a brief explanation of such a claim, showing the drawbacks of other traditional, ethical paradigms used in the ethical decision making literature, i.e. utilitarianism, universalism and (purely) virtue ethics (Koehn, 1995). According to the utilitarian rationale, decision makers evaluate and choose the alternatives depending on the expected effects, thus enhancing their satisfaction/utility

(Kim et al., 2009). Despite the different sophistications of the utilitarian approach, a common element of all these theories is that the agent is rational and able to evaluate the situation and its outcome. Definitely, such requisites are not met by talking about intuition, especially the ability to forecast and choose the preferable outcomes. Conversely, universalism imposes that every act is performed according to general and transcendental moral principles (Kant, *Foundations of the metaphysics of morals*, ed. orig. 1785; 1959). So, from this perspective, the traditional way to exert a decision making process is through applying universal concepts to the particularities of reality, i.e. the determinant judgment (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. orig. 1790; 1914; 5: 386-389). However, another kind of judgment is also present, i.e. reflective judgment, where peculiarities of reality are connected with universal concepts given by pure reason. This form of judgment may suit the intuition process more; however, as Kant (1914) himself declares, a reflective judgment is carried out through confrontation and dialectics and again this connotation does not completely suit an instinctive process.

Finally, virtue ethics refer to specific human qualities, or virtues that are dispositions acquired, exercised, and instructed by moral actions (Crossan et al., 2013; Melé, 2005). Our approach actually draws really close to the virtue ethics paradigm; however, a strict application of that paradigm would imply asserting that intuition needs to be exerted in an effortful way. While we may agree that even this unconscious process can be sharpened to some extent, nevertheless it will never be completely under control – as a proper virtue or moral habit would require. However, our elaboration of *synderesis* better suits an integrated model. *Synderesis* is both a typically innate and natural human sense, such as moral intuition (Haidt, 2001), and partially acquired and partially natural (Forlivesi, 1993; Poinot, 1985), which satisfies the traditional criteria of a ‘proper’ virtue ethics approach, and its virtuous action influences the moral reasoning process more.

Another consideration to be made is that *synderesis*, despite having two constituent parts, is not a virtue *per se*. Actually, in line with the Thomistic tradition, we acknowledge the fact that in order to be virtuous, the decision making process needs moral reasoning. In fact, *innate synderesis* regulates the intuitive process and in this way offers an embryonic intuitive moral judgment inclined toward goodness. We are claiming that this basic moral, natural and innate intuition of morality is ‘intrinsically’ connatural in all human beings (Dierksmeier and Celano, 2012), and also in accordance with the scholastic thoughts of Bonaventure (1956) and Gerson (1958). However, in order to act completely virtuously, this natural inclination is not enough; it is necessary to have the support of all the other cardinal virtues (*S. Th.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q.61, a.1). For example, without practical reason such good initial intuition can be translated into careless behaviors, or without fortitude the planned and intended behaviors can be weakened by the harshness of contingencies. Thus, for all these reasons, *synderesis* is able to give moral content to intuition but this is only what we can call a ‘moral premise’ that does not necessarily lead to virtuous behaviors. However, it is also true that, without such a universal innate ability oriented toward goodness, the possibility of being virtuous would be much more impaired. Yet, neglecting the naturally and innate inclination toward the morality of human beings would imply a dangerous assumption about human nature seen as innately sterile, if not worse, i.e. wicked, opening up for a dangerously moral relativism or situationalism (Lewis, 1989).

Probably a much better assumption would be to consider *synderesis* as the habit that to some extent contributes to what the Ancient Greeks would refer to as *enkrateia*, which means ‘continence or self-mastery’ (*NE*, VII, 8, 1151a27-28; see also Arjoon, 2008). Such a state is related to a situation in which the decision maker, despite appetites and emotions, is able to act according reason, thus reaching a moral behavior even without the intervention of a virtuous process (Arjoon, 2008, p. 228). We admit that *enkratic*

people in this perspective are seen as rationalist agents but, as we stressed many times within this work, our principal aim is to give theoretical foundations to the last evolutions of psychology by highlighting the significant role of moral intuition for an integrated ethical decision making process. Thus, *synderesis* leads to self-mastery (*enkrateia*) as far as it regulates emotions and instincts, particularly the most irrational and ‘eruptive’ of the ‘hot’ system during the intuitive phase (*innate synderesis*). At the same time, during the ‘rational’ process, it preserves the decision maker’s cognitive process from distortions that would deviate reasoning from moral judgment and behavior (*acquired synderesis*).

Specifically in relation to the virtue of practical reasoning, the ‘acquired’ feature of *synderesis* (Poincot, 1985) – which constantly reminds of innate moral contents during moral reasoning – seems able to facilitate the application of such a virtue to a potential or virtual status. This is a premise for an executive *habitus* that, finally, implies a virtuous behavior. Decision makers unconsciously elaborate intuitive moral judgment, as we said through *innate synderesis*, whenever there is a moral issue to be discerned. However, thanks to the habit of *acquired synderesis*, also a ‘routinization’ of such judgments occurs. Thus, *acquired synderesis* facilitates a particular form of moral common sense, namely *synesis*, which, according to Aquinas, is one of the potential parts of practical reason – along with *eubolia* and *gnome* – rightly able to judge in ordinary cases (*S. Th.*, II<sup>ae</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q.51, a.3, a.4; Pellegrini and Ciappei, 2015). As a result, the constant natural inclination toward good of *innate synderesis* may become a potential virtuous practice thanks to its ‘acquired’ element, which functions as an elicitor of *synesis* and its judgment in ordinary cases where the discernment follows known paths. Although this discussion about *synderesis* and practical reason is only embryonic and beyond the scope of the present paper, it could be an interesting avenue for future developments.

## **Implications for Managers**

The decision maker's moral reasoning has to be continuously overhauled for what Benedict XVI referred to as "ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28, a, 2005). Palazzo et al. (2013) define ethical blindness as "the temporary inability of a decision maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake" (p. 325), due to the rational incapacity of accessing moral principles that are naturally innate. This is particularly relevant in business contexts, where economic, financial and political interests frequently stimulate managers' rational insensitivity to ethical dilemmas (Groves et al., 2008; Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). As previously stated, the main function of moral reasoning refers to rationalize, re-examine, and justify decision makers' moral judgment (Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2005). Actually, managers' rational decision making may sometimes be excessively characterized by a consequential and preference-based attitude that pursues the maximization of individual preferences. Moreover, an excessive reliance on utilitarian reasoning about individual benefits may incline decision makers toward consequentialism aimed at outcome-based judgment (Kim et al., 2009). As a result, consequentialist decision making may induce managers to Machiavellianism, defined as "amoral in the sense that the end, which is usually winning, is sufficient justification for the means" (Miesing and Preble, 1985, p. 467). Hence, managers showing high Machiavellianism may pursue objectives by neglecting intuitive moral judgments on behalf of unethical tactics and strategies. Consequently, the deliberative sub-process of rational justification present in moral reasoning may deviate from managers' intuitive moral judgments that previously resulted from moral intuition.

The theoretical insights proposed in this paper seem to be relevant in the modern debate related to the reflective practice of ethical reasoning, particularly analyzed in managerial education and management development literature (Small and Cullen, 1995). The traditional framework of 'reflective thinking' generally accepted in pertinent literature (Schon, 1983), mainly focuses on the rational aspects of human cognitive processes. The accent has been prevailingly placed on managers' awareness and perception of a particular issue, which, in moral terms, represents the first component of Rest's rationalist framework (1986) of ethical decision making (moral awareness). Traditionally, management development programs provide reflective actions such as 'critical reflection', 'reframing', and 'unlearning/relearning' activities, through which the educational development of decision makers is improved (Small and Cullen, 1995). In this context, moral issues should also represent elements upon which the decision maker has to reflect. Precisely, one of the main 'action points' that our model would like to stimulate refers to the 'rediscovery' of intuition and intuitive moral judgments when reflecting upon moral issues. In this way, the decision maker will reflect and deliberate not only on the moral judgment resulting from the reasoning process, but also on the spontaneous intuitive moral judgment resulting from the moral intuition phase. The scholastic concept of *synderesis* actually serves a crucial function in this process. This role of *synderesis* becomes significant when managers, for example, focus on economic evaluations, such as in cost/benefit analysis. In such circumstances, moral reasoning risks being misled by immoral judgments that result in unethical decision making. Hence, one of the main criticalities of ethical decision making refers to managers' misled moral reasoning that may supersede *synderesis*, producing in this way both unethical judgments and behaviors.

As a result of the above considerations, a 'rediscovery' of the idea of moral intuition allows managers to reflect on and re-think what their unconscious instinctual response

was, and hopefully to ‘re-calibrate’ their judgments on ethical dilemmas. In this way, the effectiveness of the whole ethical decision making process should be increased.

## **Conclusion**

The traditional rationalist framework of ethical decision making has been challenged by recent psychological and managerial literature, which stresses the importance of unconscious elements of decision makers’ cognition, such as intuition and emotions. Building on the recent social intuitionist perspective, our discussion led us to interpret moral intuition as an antecedent of the ethical decision making process, to be blended with the traditional moral reasoning or the deliberative and intentional process. Furthermore, we use the scholastic framework to enlarge the virtue ethics approaches. Particularly, the scholastic concept of *synderesis*, thanks to its dual nature, allowed us to integrate the innate ability of moral intuition with moral reasoning in the ethical decision making framework.

We recognize that our paper suffers from some limitations, mostly because our considerations and propositions are purely theoretical and not supported by empirical evidence. For example, an experimental setting could be useful to empirically test the assumptions that moral intuition precedes the stages of the ethical decision making framework. Concerning future researches, it would be interesting to apply the whole socio-intuitionist framework (Haidt, 2001) in a managerial context, thus analyzing how social persuasion and social influence link the impact on the ethical decision making process. Furthermore, a relevant issue that has not received appropriate consideration is what happens when the two cognitive systems of human decision making – Systems 1 and 2 – contrast and how the resulting conflicts may be handled by decision makers. Particularly, relevant attention should be given to the role



emotions have whenever they are in contrast to individual moral reasoning. Another interesting future direction for this work is using our conceptualization of ethical decision making in the context of entrepreneurship personality traits (Rauch and Frese, 2007). Particularly, some features of successful entrepreneurs are innate while others are achieved thanks to training and experience. Thus, our model may be employed in this field of research in order to better understand how moral intuition is related to entrepreneurial performance.

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